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AUTHOR Garrott, C. L.
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ABSTRACT

A study compared the effectiveness of two methods of teaching the passe compose and imparfait of French verbs. Sixty community college students were randomly assigned to two treatment groups, one taught with the traditional method focusing on rules governing tense application, and the other taught by the aspectual method, which treats the imparfait as a background to a verb in the passe compose. The same oral and written exercises were used in each group. Students were tested on 20 items. The results indicate that the aspectual method was significantly more effective in this experimental situation, but not by a great margin. Some students in each group performed poorly on the test. Confounding variables may include short treatment period preceding the test and the subjects' awareness that they were not being tested for a grade. However, it is concluded that the aspectual method may be the more effective for introducing the two tenses, with the traditional method used for later refinement of tense definitions. (MSE)

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TEACHING THE PASSE COMPOSE AND THE IMPARFAIT IN FRENCH:

TRADITIONAL VERSUS ASPECTUAL METHODS

Dr. C. L. Garrott

Division of Foreign Languages

CHOWAN COLLEGE

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TRADITIONAL VERSUS ASPECTUAL METHODS

Introduction

Considerable attention is paid to the verb in teaching French, and many formal and informal investigations have centered both on the proper definition of and rationale for each tense. A persistent problem in French continues to be the passé composé and the imparfait. To many of our students the correct use of these tenses seem to be deliberately calculated to make French study laborious and confusing.

Many textbooks explain past tenses as a series of governing rules (See Sources Consulted). The most common explanations in college French textbooks are:

PASSE COMPOSE	IMPARFAIT
1. Expresses a single completed past or a sequence of such actions: you can pinpoint the beginning and the end of the action.	1. Expresses continuous actions or situations. You cannot pinpoint the end of an action nor say exactly how many times it happened.
	2. Describes scenes, tells time and expresses age, describes feelings, emotional and/or mental

states, and physical conditions.

2. Expresses an interrupting action.

3. Describes an action or situation that was happening when another event interrupted it.

3. "ago"

4. would/used to

These traditional explanations are followed by sentences illustrating contrastive problems. Fill-in-the-blank exercises using unconnected and/or connected passages of prose form the testing cycle.

Other approaches to past tenses in French do exist. Abrate (1983) contends that traditional rules appear to be accurate, yet incomplete. She explains that both past tenses may express completed actions, mental states, repetition, interrupted action, duration or continuation. "Ago" may also be expressed in the imparfait emphasizing continuity. Abrate focuses upon verb classifications: momentary vs. non-momentary verbs. Momentary verbs are defined as limited to a "moment" in the past. Non-momentary verbs are defined as difficult to limit in time, such as thoughts, feelings, and weather. Furthermore, verbs that fall within both categories explain the numerous exceptions commonly found in traditional textbooks. She punctuates her system with R (repetion), C (continuity), I (termination), and M (momentariness). The focus of her

technique is upon nuance, context, and intention of the the speaker, not upon absolute rules.

Cox (1982) also disapproves of the traditional approach to the past tenses. Cox exphasizes the inchoative vs. non-inchoative nature of these tenses. The passé composé accentuates the inception of the action, whereas the imparfait is non-inchoative.

Thogmartin (1984) recognizes Cox's argument; however, he suggests that more attention should be paid to text, context, and discourse by drawing upon real-life or literary narrative. A central issue in his argument is sequentiality of past events: the passé composé summarizes a series of events, while the imparfait lists nonsequential events in the past or actions not part of the sequence. Thogmartin insists that his technique improves student sensitivity to nuances in the past tense.

Dansereau (1987) offers a simple technique based upon Pulgram (1984). This technique is:

IMPARFAIT	PASSE COMPOSE
a. what the condition was	a. what happened
b. what was going on	b. what happened next

This aspectual technique appears to handle the question of the imparfait as a background to a verb in the passé composé. Weather expressions in the past, according to Dansereau, are

either descriptions of a condition or something going on, or a completed action in the past. Aspectual choices become the speaker's perogative and perception. Dansereau warns that examples should be studied in the classroom in terms of the four explanations only. Aspect of the verb and student perception of a past event must be stressed using many exercises and paragraphs (Dansereau 1987).

There is little empirical research to suggest that the traditional approach is significantly more effective than the aspectual method. The present study focused attention primarily upon past tenses, the passé composé and the imparfait. Attention was directed toward investigating if there was a significant difference between the two methods using a community college sample. In the current study, we taught the past tenses, in an individualized atmosphere, in one of two methods. The traditional method involved a rule governed explanation, followed by modelling and feedback. The aspectual approach centered upon Dansereau's (1987) explanations, followed by modelling and feedback. Student performance in two conditions was compared statistically.

Method

Subjects

The first sample consisted of 75 community college student enrolled in three elementary French classes (French 102). Ten students decided not to participate and five students were ex-

cluded because they were repeating French 102. The final sample consisted of 60 community college students (male=25; female=35) enrolled in French 102 after the first quiz. Quiz grades for subjects were: A=5; B=10, C=32; and D=13.

Students were randomly assigned to one of two groups: traditional or aspectual. The textbook for all subjects was Accent (Mondeli et al., 1984). The two instructors involved in the treatment phase were not the regular teachers for the subjects. Table I gives a brief description of the two instructors participating in the treatment phase.

Description of the Instructors

	Teacher A	Teacher B
Years of Teaching Experience	13	10
Highest Degree Held	M.A.	M.A.
Sex	Female	Male
Number of Students in Investigation	30	30

Preliminary Procedures

1. The passé composé was introduced three weeks before the final examination to all students in French 101. The instruction presented the use of the auxiliary verb avoir plus the past participle. Only nine irregular past participles were learned: eu, été, dit, fait, voulu, venu, allé, compris and pris. The use of être with venu and allé was prefaced by exercises illustrating how past participles may become adjectival or agreeing in number and in gender with the noun modified. In French 101 students learned that the passé composé had three equivalent forms in English:

j'ai fini = a. I finished
b. I did finish
c. I have finished

Students also learned that the passé composé was used to report a fact. Exercises in the textbook, laboratory manual, and workbook modelled the tense for the students. The instructors indicated the nature of errors and provided grammatical cues to solving the replacement exercises.

2. The use of intransitive verbs of motion in the passé composé began the first full week of French 102 for all students. The students learned that the past participle agreed in number and gender with the subject. Descendre, monter, passer, rentrer, retourner, and sortir were explained as being both transitive and intransitive verbs. All students received the same number of oral and written exercises during this phase. Quiz one for

all students took the form of a connected passage of prose in which the students filled in the blank (fifteen items) with the correct form of the passé composé. Quiz one was administered after two weeks of French 102.

3. All students learned the endings of the imparfait and how to form the stem: add the endings ais, ais, ait, ions, iez, and aient to the stem of the first person plural of the present tense. Paradigms were provided to illustrate the three conjugations as well as the orthographic changes required in -ger and -cer verbs. Modelling and reinforcement took the form of teacher cues and/or drills, laboratory and workbook practice.

4. At this point sixty subjects were randomly assigned to one of two groups: traditional or aspectual. The sixty subjects were interviewed to ascertain major weaknesses in the formation of the two past tenses. Once satisfied that subjects reached criterion, the guest instructors began the two-week treatment phase. Normal instruction proceeded with other topics in the regular classroom.

Treatment Phase

The treatment phase consisted of introducing the differences between the two past tenses. The traditional group learned to apply governing rules:

Passé Composé	Imparfait
1. Beginning and end of action stated or implied	1. Action seen in progress

2. Duration of action stated or implied	2. Repeated and habitual actions with no time or numerical limits
3. Number of repeated action stated or implied	3. Existing state of mind or condition
4. Change in state of mind or in condition	4. Weather, age, and time

The instructor provided examples of each category. A list of adverbs and expressions of time were used as guides for correct tense selection. Instruction was reinforced by laboratory and workbook exercises, and homework. Drill in oral and written forms were given even weight in the treatment phase.

The aspectual group learned to determine the correct past tense by answering four questions:

Passé Composé	Imparfait
1. What happened?	1. What were the conditions
2. What happened next?	2. What was going on?

The instructor modelled the same oral and written exercises as the traditional group; however the aspectual definitions applied to every exercise in the treatment sessions, in the laboratory, and on homework. Errors in the classroom were corrected by directive cues using the aspectual definition.

Furthermore, subjects were taught that the imparfait expressed habitual actions, set backgrounds or scenes, and leaves one hanging in anticipation of the passé composé (Dansereau, 1987).

Testing Procedure

A fill-in-the-blank passage of connected prose evaluated all subjects in the investigation. Each subject spent forty minutes writing out answers to a twenty item quiz. The instructors counted the correct responses and returned the materials to the chief investigator for final analysis. Morphological errors were not analyzed.

Results

Table II presents the mean correct responses in both treatments on the testing procedure. Subjects in the aspectual group had more mean correct responses than subjects in the traditional group, t (58) = 2.001, $p < .05$.

Table II

Mean Correct Scores and Standard Deviations of Treatment Groups

	Treatment	
	Traditional (N=30)	Aspectual (N=30)
Mean	10.10	11.73
SD	2.62	3.12

Discussion

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the present study was to learn more about the differences between two known methods of teaching past tenses in French. The effects of the traditional and aspectual methods were studied using community college students as subjects. The results indicated that the aspectual method was significantly more effective in the test situation. Surprisingly, the level of significance barely met the critical value of the test statistic. This would seem to indicate some persistent problems with one or both treatments:

1. Some traditional and aspectual subjects performed poorly on the quiz, prompting the investigator to conclude that some subjects became confused and unclear about the correct choice. Perhaps many subjects began to read between the lines of the definitions or found more than one definition applicable to the the problem.
2. It is also important to point out that the treatment period (three 30-minute sessions per week) was two weeks, perhaps insufficient time for junior/community college students.
3. Subjects were aware of not being formally evaluated for a course grade.

Nevertheless, this investigation provided some interesting findings that have not been explored in empirical research. This study did indicate which method might have the most potential in the classroom environment, that is, the aspectual method. Given the eclectic methods employed by most classroom

instructors, it would appear that using the aspectual method as an introduction to past tenses might prove beneficial to subjects, and later the instructor might refine the definitions with traditional explanations.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. The research design might be replicated at the high school level.

2. The replication of the experimental design might be used in Spanish and in German.

3. New classification variables might be entered into the design: error correction, feedback, modelling, gender, course grade/GPA, and inductive and deductive methods.

APPENDIX A

Testing Procedure

Write out the following passage, putting each verb in parenthesis into either the passé composé or the imparfait as would be most appropriate. Drop the mute "e" of the subject pronoun if necessary.

Je_____(aller) en France. Mes parents et moi _____(prendre) l'avion et nous _____ _____(arriver) à l'aéroport Charles de Gaulle à Paris. Des amis _____(attendre) à l'aéroport et nous _____(aller) chez eux en voiture. Je _____(être) un peu peur dans la voiture. Il y _____(avoir) beaucoup de circulation et tout le monde _____(être) très pressé. A la maison, nos amis _____(préparer) un bon déjeuner avec un dessert qui _____(être) formidable! Après le déjeuner nous _____(prendre) le métro. Quelle expérience! Les passager _____(être) comme des sardines dans une boîte de conserve. A côté de moi il y _____(avoir) un homme qui _____(porter) un grand chapeau. Il _____(dire) quelque chose mais je ne

le _____(comprendre) pas. Je ne

_____(parler) pas très bien le français.

Nous _____(faire) les courses et nous

_____(rentrer). Ce _____(être)

une journée formidable. (Adapted from Allons-y, Bragger and Rice, 1984)

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